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Thatcher ducks spy case questioning

LONDON (Reuters) — Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher yesterday dodged questions about persistent reports of a major spy case at one of Britain's most secret intelligence bases.

Mrs. Thatcher, whose Conservative government is already embarrassed by the sudden disclosure of breaches in the guard around Queen Elizabeth, made a brief, low-key statement to Parliament in response to a clamor for information from the opposition and her supporters alike.

But she disclosed nothing that was not already known to the general public — that a taxi driver who worked at Government Communications Headquarters from 1968 to 1977 was charged July 15 under the Official Secrets Act.

The question-and-answer session in Parliament was overshadowed by the twin IRA bombing attacks in London, which Mrs. Thatcher condemned as "callous and cowardly crimes committed by evil and brutal men who know nothing of democracy."

Home Secretary William Whitelaw is expected to make further statements to Parliament today on the security at the palace and the resignation of the bodyguard, Commander Michael Trestrail, 51.

GCHQ, at Cheltenham, 100 miles west of London, is Britain's electronic espionage center, where 8,000 scientists, mathematicians and computer experts handle sensitive government messages and monitor coded foreign signals.

It collaborates closely with its American counterpart, the National Security Agency.

The accused man, Geoffrey Prime, was alleged to have committed a series of unspecified acts of espionage over the last 14 years.

Mrs. Thatcher, who is personally responsible for intelligence matters, deflected all questions, saying she could say nothing further until a trial was completed.

But the prime minister acknowledged the charge was serious and said any security issues arising from the case would be referred to the security commission, the government's intelligence watchdog.

The prime minister said she could not state whether anyone else was likely to be charged. "Absolute certainty is never possible in these matters," she said.